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# Lu Xun and Contemporary Chinese Literature

John Chinnery

In a famous article written in 1928 when the Left-wing writers of the Sun and Creation Societies were criticising Lu Xun for being behind the times, Qian Xingcun (A Ying) asserted that the age of Ah Q was already past.<sup>1</sup> Fifty years later Chen Baichen's dramatization of *Ah Q Zhengzhuan*, which was staged in 1981 as part of the Lu Xun centenary celebrations, ends with the narrator declaring that although Ah Q had no women it was not true that he would have no descendants, because his line would continue for generations to come.<sup>2</sup> It is, of course, possible to reconcile these two apparently contradictory statements. Qian Xingcun was referring to the fact that the peasant masses were becoming politically organized, having played an important role in the revolutionary movements of those years. He did not claim that people like Ah Q no longer existed. Chen Baichen, on the other hand, was referring to the Ah Q mentality which still lives on in people's minds, long after Ah Q himself has been executed. He did not see this mentality as the dominant force in society. Nevertheless there have been striking changes of attitude towards Ah Q in recent years. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution it has been generally recognized that the Ah Q mentality is still a force in China which is holding back attempts at modernization and that many other aspects of the Chinese traditional society and culture which Lu Xun criticized in his stories and essays have still not been eradicated 45 years after his death. The assertion that Ah Q is, in this sense, still alive leads one to wonder to what extent his creator, Lu Xun still survives as a living force in Chinese literature. During the period of his apotheosis by the extreme Left, Lu Xun was transformed into a symbol and his true image as a writer and a human being were suppressed. He was presented as a model revolutionary as conceived by the extreme Left, whose every word was gospel truth, and woe betide anyone whom he had criticized, however slightly. Although his works were among the few dating from the twenties and thirties which were still available on sale, a rigid interpretation of them was enforced and serious discussion of them was quite out of the question. It is not to be wondered at that a certain apathy towards him was discernible during the immediate post-Cultural Revolution period. Most contemporary writers, however, recognize in Lu Xun not only an exemplary revolutionary and humanist, but also the founder of the modern school of realism in Chinese literature. Their debt to him is enormous and his influence is unavoidable. The nature of that debt was the theme of many papers read at the conferences held during 1981 both in the regions and at the capital

1. Qian Xingcun, "Siqu le de Ah Q shidai," in Li Helin ed., *Lu Xun lun*, pp. 71-116. Qian's opinion was opposed by Qing Jian in the May 1929 issue of *Yusi*.

2. The text of Chen's play is published in *Juben*, No. 4 (1981), pp. 18-54. At the performance I attended these lines evoked noises of approval among the audience.

of China to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Lu Xun's birth.<sup>3</sup> The climax of these celebrations was the commemorative meeting held on 25 September in the Great Hall of the People, attended by 6,000 people and addressed by Hu Yaobang and Zhou Yang, which reaffirmed the importance of Lu Xun's example as a revolutionary, a writer and a human being.

The ceremonial nature of these meetings and conferences made it almost inevitable that the contributions made to them should either attempt to summarize or underline various aspects of the Lu Xun heritage, or to make general statements about the importance of learning from and following Lu Xun's example. Hu Yaobang also used the occasion to make what amounted to an important statement about the contemporary literary scene and the Party's policy towards it. All these contributions merit study, but this article is concerned with questions which were not much discussed at the Lu Xun centennial but which nevertheless have been raised by some writers within China: What, in addition to his universally acclaimed fighting spirit and revolutionary approach, can present-day writers learn from Lu Xun's works? What elements among his subject-matter, literary forms or techniques are still applicable under today's conditions? These questions are not easy to answer within the compass of a few pages. The present article merely comments on some of the ideas gleaned from Chinese writers round about the time of the centennial last year.

In order to narrow the discussion somewhat this article will be mainly concerned with Lu Xun's contribution as a writer of fiction. It could be argued that in the long run it is this part of his literary output which will have the most lasting influence. Although the political and cultural questions of the twenties and thirties which Lu Xun wrote about in his essays are still relatively fresh in the memories of the older generation, as these times recede into the past it is difficult to see how Lu Xun's topical writings can continue to make a great impact. Moreover Lu Xun's particular style of satire cannot easily be used in present-day China. This is not merely because Mao Zedong all those years ago in Yanan warned against using satire against the people. Even up to today nobody has adequately discussed what role satire should play in relation to contemporary society. Although some satirical writing has appeared since 1977, and satire has been used to much effect in such popular forms as cartoons or *xiangsheng*, even these movements have waned since 1979, and satire has generally given way to a gentler form of humour, and a more circumspect approach to social comment. An additional reason for concentrating on Lu Xun's fiction is that an important feature of the

3. Local conferences were held in advance of the national conference which was held in Beijing from 17 to 24 September. Earlier in the summer of 1981 two regional conferences were held, one in Yangzhou to cover the south of China, and one in Dalian to cover the north. Fifty-eight papers were selected from these conferences to be read in Beijing. In addition to the conferences and the big commemorative meeting, many local meetings, conferences and dramatic performances were held in memory of Lu Xun. In Beijing these included two new *huaju*: Chen's play referred to above and Mei Qian's *Xianheng jidian*, an amalgamation of the plots of several Lu Xun stories. There were also new local opera, ballet and musical versions of various of his works.

present literary scene is the gradual re-emergence of realistic writing in which the propaganda element is no longer so prominent. This leads writers naturally and as a matter of course to turn, among others, to Lu Xun for inspiration. His influence is increased by the realisation which is exemplified in Chen Baichen's play referred to above, that in spite of the vast changes which have taken place, some aspects of that very reality which was reflected in Lu Xun's stories, still exists in China today: that, in one sense at least, Ah Q is still not dead.

In discussing Lu Xun's contribution in the field of the short story three points emerge as those of most interest to present-day writers. First, as Lu Xun himself recognized, the great advantage that he started with as a story writer was that his circumstances gave him an opportunity to see life in its true colours. This ability to see life honestly, without preconceptions or illusions, is a pre-condition for writing in the realist tradition. This might seem to be an elementary point, even a trite observation. Yet in a country which has just emerged from a period of intense persecution of writers, and in which the pressure to write in such a way as to produce positive social effects is still great, this quality in Lu Xun is the object of admiration and emulation. Connected with this basic honesty of approach is Lu Xun's conscious effort to understand and analyse the problems of society. As the hero of *A Madman's Diary* said, "Everything must be studied if it is to be understood." Lu Xun read extensively in the fields of literature, philosophy and history and was particularly interested in China's national characteristics. He considered that most Chinese were insufficiently self-critical when it came to their own society and culture, and recommended people to read such books as A. H. Smith's *Chinese Characteristics* which, while containing much nonsense, also included some home truths about China which gave food for thought.<sup>4</sup> There is much in Lu Xun's stories which stems from his direct observations of life (or, as he put it, the parts of his experience he had not been able to forget) but his stories contain an equally important element of conscious analysis.

A second characteristic of Lu Xun as a writer of fiction is that he was one of the first writers in China, and certainly the first in the modern period to depict peasants and village life with any degree of realism. This might not be so important in some cultures, but in China, where peasants comprise such a large proportion of the population, it is of the greatest significance. What particularly breathes life into Lu Xun's peasant characters (I use the term peasant in a broad sense), is not merely that he describes their economic problems or social status (though occasionally as in *Guxiang* he does this too), but rather that he is able to depict their mentality and spiritual condition with such a sure touch. The comment is frequently made in China, that the small-producer mentality is one of the factors slowing up China's modernization. Lu Xun's ability to put his finger on some of the crucial features of this mentality gives added topicality to his stories.

4. See Lu Xun, "Mashang zhi riji" in *Lu Xun quanji*, Vol. III, 1957 ed., p. 240.

A third point is that Lu Xun had the ability to transform what appears to be the most commonplace of material into images of profound significance. Most of his stories are about the everyday lives of ordinary people. His skill as a writer depends on the selection of the significant and meaningful from everyday life rather than on elaboration of plot, or the manipulation of the sensational or exotic. In this respect Lu Xun presents an excellent example for today's young writers, some of whom tend to write with insufficient compression, or to experiment with exotic forms or subject-matter which is too far removed from current Chinese experience or taste.

Let us take the first of the above points: Lu Xun's objectivity, observation and analysis of society and consider the extent to which they may be applied to the contemporary situation. A question not too dissimilar from this was raised by the author and journalist Liu Binyan in a speech he made in 1980:

It seems to me . . . up to now we do not possess a scientific and realistic understanding of our own society. I think this is very dangerous . . . we have entrusted the duty of investigating our society to our high level leading comrades. All of our people, including those working in the social sciences, in philosophy, simply wait for instructions, so that they may explain them. Literary works are supposed to be illustrations of those instructions. Is this not so? But mankind's learning about itself has always been a process in which the whole of mankind has participated. . . . Haven't we writers abandoned this duty? What do we try to investigate? What are we required to investigate? What are we allowed to investigate? Is it not a fact that independent thought was no longer wanted, was criminal? That concern for the people and the country was criminal? But facts prove that to entrust this to a minority will not do. However great a person may be, this is not a burden he is capable of bearing.<sup>5</sup>

Liu Binyan's remarks were not confined to problems of literature but also pleaded for the revival of social science in China. But their application to literature is obvious. During the 1950s the high prestige enjoyed by the Party following its successes in restoring the economy and carrying out basic reforms led many writers willingly to entrust the task of analysing society to the Party leadership and to assume the role of interpreters and illustrators of Party policy. To take writers about the countryside as examples, even those with firsthand knowledge of the countryside, writers who were themselves once peasants, such as Zhao Shuli or Hao Ran wrote what were in essence illustrations of policy rather than realistic works of fiction in the usual sense of the term. Their intimate acquaintance with peasant life and language, and their grasp of the important issues of the day gave their works a certain flavour of realism. Zhao Shuli's stories remain fresh because they deal mainly with questions from the New Democratic revolution – land reform, the marriage law, etc., which have a more general relevance; but now that the Leftism of the Cultural Revolution has been abandoned, and the post-1957 policies on agricultural collectivization re-evaluated, who

5. *Liu Binyan baogao wenxue xuan* (Beijing 1981), pp. 17–18.

reads Hao Ran's compendious novels now, skilfully written though they may have been?

If writers are to do more than put flesh on the bare bones of others' analysis, after the manner of Hao Ran, they are bound to think about society and its problems and to test others' theories and policies against their own observation, even if at the end of the day, they may agree with the broad outlines provided by political leaders. Liu Binyan is himself a famous investigative journalist, his *Ren yao zhi jian*<sup>6</sup> and other pieces in this genre having a well-deserved reputation for their skilful exposure of political skulduggery and corruption among local cadres in the Northeast, Shandong and elsewhere. Although writing in a different genre from Lu Xun, he is an heir to the Lu Xun heritage in two ways. First, as a journalist he is both a student and an investigator of Chinese life and society, and secondly, he uses literature as a means of fighting for social justice (the contemporary equivalent of Lu Xun's aim of "reforming society"). Like Lu Xun he has encountered opposition and criticism, ranging from complaints by provincial authorities who find themselves threatened by his exposures, to threats, anonymous letters and fabricated rumours about his private life.<sup>7</sup>

On the whole the Chinese tradition does not encourage outspokenness among writers, and Liu Binyan's experiences show that however favourable the political climate may be to such social criticism, writers are likely to find it an uphill task. For this aspect of Lu Xun's example to be followed it is all the more necessary for the authorities to encourage the creation of an atmosphere conducive to the expression of writers' own opinions on society and its problems. The crude style of Party direction of literature, which showed some signs of not being really dead and buried in 1981, will have to be resolutely abandoned. Although a cautious form of conservatism on this issue is still in evidence, the argument that a modernized economy and society also demands a modernized literature and art is a powerful one.

Turning now to the relevance of the content of Lu Xun's stories to contemporary literature, the writer who has expressed most clearly his indebtedness to Lu Xun is the dramatist and story writer Sui Shuyang. In an interview about his play *Neighbours (Zuo-lin-you-she)*<sup>8</sup> broadcast on Beijing Radio in September 1980 he said the following:

The motivation for writing *Neighbours* came to me several years ago but it only took shape as a play last summer. Why should I want to write such a play? This is connected with a question I have been pondering for the past few years: how to understand the ordinary people of our country. While the theatre was controlled by the 'Gang of four' the characters who appeared on the stage were the so-called heroes who wore haloes on their heads and had no need for mortal food. It was these people who dominated history, while the masses were turned into an ignorant herd. But in reality it is these ordinary people who are the masters of our lives and our country. They may still cling to some old customs, they may

6. Ibid. pp. 147-206.

7. Ibid. p. 23.

8. See *Shouhuo*, No. 4 (1980), pp. 109-47.

have learned some new bad habits – they may still be spiritually scarred, which causes them to complain loudly or grumble to themselves. But in their inner being there is always a bright corner – a flame which cannot be extinguished by wind or rain. It is this flame which enabled them to overcome unimaginable difficulties and hardships . . . in the midst of the great national catastrophe, so that they could hold their heads high, grit their teeth and keep going. I feel that they are the backbone of our nation. We must not forget these ordinary people. If we forget them, then we shall lose everything. To reflect the fate of the ordinary people in works of literature – to reflect their joys and sorrows is a responsibility which we cannot shirk. It is only from these people that we can appreciate the greatness of our Party, the charm (*keai*) of our country, the hope of our nation. They are the real heroes. But I can also see that a proportion of our people have bad habits which are of long standing and difficult to eradicate. Everyone knows that Lu Xun depicted the archetypal character Ah Q. In him he showed us the backwardness, ignorance and apathy of our long-suffering people. These national weaknesses he depicted accurately and in depth. I feel that Ah Q is still alive today. Quite a large number of our people possess replicas of his soul. To criticize and expose this Ah Q mentality is an exercise in self-education. It teaches us that if we are to build a strong modernized country we must have a people which is constantly making efforts to improve itself and which has a modern outlook. Recently I received a letter from the dramatist Comrade Ding Yisan. He said that after he had seen *Neighbours* he felt that in the character of Huang Renjie and the cadre from the street committee he could see the faces of the benighted self-appointed heroes of our time. During the Cultural Revolution they will have engaged in “Quotation Battles” and factional armed struggle. The “Gang of Four” used the masses’ ignorance to create chaos. I replied “If Ah Q were still alive during the Cultural Revolution he would have fought “Quotation battles,” he would also have joined the campaign against the “four olds.” So I consider that to criticize the Ah Q mentality which is a backward, ignorant, feudal mentality is another important task for our literary work.

In form *Neighbours* owes more to Lao She’s *Teahouse* than to anything written by Lu Xun. Set in a Beijing courtyard occupied by a number of families (*dazayuar*), it shows us the relationship between these neighbours as they change over the years. The time of the action is the three National Days of 1976, 1977 and 1978. The character Huang Renjie is just such a “hero” as Ding Yisan refers to above. He shows what such heroes were really like. Having jumped on the bandwagon of the Cultural Revolution, Huang presents himself as a representative of the working class, occupies the best house in the courtyard and lords it over the other families. He suffers a reversal of fortune when he admonishes the “rightist” school teacher for playing the cello. Here he is talking to the retired painter and carpenter, Zhao Chun:

- Huang Renjie: Zhilala, zhilala. More wood sawing (shouting towards Zhao Chuan’s window) Stop playing that thing!
- Zhao Chun: You think you can tell everyone what to do. You may be the head man in the factory workshop, but you’re not his headmaster.

- Huang Renjie: You're working class too. The working class should exercise a comprehensive dictatorship over the bourgeoisie. Now you're faced with a bourgeois rightist using soft melancholy tunes to undermine the revolutionary residents, not only do you not stop it yourself but you don't want me to either.
- Zhao Chun: But he's playing a dirge. He's mourning Chairman Mao. I can understand it!
- Huang Renjie: (baffled) Well . . . (walks towards the north rooms, then turns) You mean him? A rightist mourning a proletarian leader? Rubbish! He's just sorry for himself! (goes and shouts towards Jia Chuan's room) Jia Chuan, come here!  
(Jia Chuan emerges from his room carrying his cello)
- Jia Chuan: (timidly) What do you want?
- Huang Renjie: What's that tune you're playing?
- Jia Chuan: The Glorious Sacrifice.
- Huang Renjie: Foreign music?
- Jia Chuan: Yes
- Huang Renjie: So that's the sort of foreign rubbish you like.
- Jia Chuan: It was Lenin's favourite tune.
- Huang Renjie: Well . . .  
(A plain clothes policeman enters the courtyard)<sup>9</sup>
- A little later Huang Renjie is talking to a young primary school teacher, Li Xiu:
- Huang Renjie: This is an important question which concerns the class struggle. Now about that big pot . . .
- Li Xiu: It's called a cello!
- Huang Renjie: Anyway it's foreign. Why doesn't he play a Chinese erhu?
- Li Xiu: (as if reciting something learned by heart) A violin or cello has four strings whilst an erhu has only two, so the erhu is not as expressive as the violin. The erhu's bow passes between the strings whilst the violin's bow has been liberated. . . .
- Huang Renjie: What rubbish! Who said that?
- Li Xiu: (smiling) Our beloved standard-bearer!
- Huang Renjie: What! She said it? She . . .
- Li Xiu: You have no answer to that one, have you?
- Huang Renjie: You must have got it wrong. The Chinese working class doesn't like foreign fiddles!  
(enter a plain-clothes policeman)<sup>10</sup>

The plain-clothes policeman has noted Huang Renjie's criticism of Jiang Qing's words and eventually he is arrested. His detention only lasts a few days and after his release he continues to behave in a similar manner, blocking progress at the works by playing the petty bureaucratic tyrant.

9. Ibid. p. 112.

10. Ibid. p. 23.

Su Shuyang is not concerned only with the Ah Q mentality in the sense in which it is usually understood, that is, Ah Q's method of winning "spiritual victories." He is concerned also with the wider aspects of the "mentality of the small producer," whose vision is limited and who seeks short-term advantages without comprehending the long-term consequences of his actions. When I questioned him about the Ah Q mentality he drew attention to the words used by Lu Xun near the end of his story *Guxiang* to describe the kind of lives which the narrator of the story wanted people to break away from: *mamu* (stupidified; dispirited) and *zisui* (dissolute; unscrupulous).<sup>11</sup> He claimed that the Ah Q mentality also had something of these qualities in it. Writing about the Chinese national character (by which he meant the negative side of it) to Xu Guangping, Lu Xun said:

The degeneration of the Chinese national character does not, I feel, result from the Chinese people being solely concerned with the family. It is not that they pay too much attention to the family. The root cause of their trouble is that their vision is too limited and also that they are "spineless" and "greedy." But these characteristics have been acquired over a long period and are not easily got rid of.<sup>12</sup>

Of course the Chinese people also have other characteristics, such as the capacity for hard work and the ability to endure hardships, but such negative qualities are still seen by writers to exist among the Chinese people. The two characters who exemplify them in *Neighbours* are a factory cadre and a street committee cadre. Unlike Ah Q neither is being oppressed or downtrodden. On the contrary they have both come into positions of authority. They are rather more like the Ah Q of the dream episode, in which he dreams that the men in white helmets and white armour call for him and he leads them to make the revolution. Soon all his erstwhile adversaries are kneeling before him begging for mercy, and as in the case of Pirate-Jenny in Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*,<sup>13</sup> he has power of life and death over them. Those he decides have to die include not only the landlord Zhao Taiye and his son, but also poor people like Xiao Di and Wang Hu who happen to have crossed him. Chen Baichen's *Ah Q Zhengzhuàn* expands this dream sequence into a full scene performed in Peking Opera style, in which Ah Q gives the command to the white-clad warriors to mount the assault on Zhao Taiye's residence. Lei Luosheng, whose brilliant performance as Ah Q was such an outstanding feature of the Beijing Experimental Theatre's production of the play said the following in a newspaper interview: "This is the Ah Q style of revolution: he doesn't only want to become a real person, he wants to become a top person."<sup>14</sup> The phenomenon of officials, including high officials, feathering their nests at public expense, which has not been unknown in recent years, is one aspect of the Ah Q

11. *Lu Xun quanji*, I, p. 70.

12. Lu Xun, *Liang di shu*, No. 10 (April 1925), 1.

13. See Bertolt Brecht's *Dreigroschenbuch*, (Frankfurt am Main, 1960), pp. 22-23. Pirate-Jenny sings of the ship with eight sails and 50 cannon which will attack the town, and in which she will sail away after she has ordered the decapitations.

14. *Beijing Xijubao*, No. 36 (September 1981), p. 1.

revolution. The suppression of many of the more far-sighted cadres and intellectuals in the anti-Rightist movement and the Cultural Revolution allowed such Ah Q type " revolutionaries " to re-emerge.

Of all contemporary writers Su Shuyang has been the most articulate about his indebtedness to Lu Xun. This indebtedness is, however, confined to the ideas and characters of Lu Xun's stories. As regards the formal presentation of his ideas, he is more indebted to that other giant of modern Chinese literature, Lao She. Su Shuyang is a great admirer of Lao She's dramatic inventiveness as exemplified in *Chaguar (Teahouse)*. He considers that in expanding the scope of Chinese drama to include not only the inner development of characters in relation to each other, but also their reaction to and development in relation to events, Lao She has created a dramatic form which is well adapted to depicting the rapidly changing Chinese reality. In his own plays, and particularly in *Neighbours*, Su Shuyang attempts with considerable success to advance this new approach.

As regards the short story, no contemporary writer can be expected to compare with Lu Xun in respect of observation and analysis or of compression and economy of expression. In those respects Lu Xun is in a class of his own. Yet in recent years a few writers have emerged who have looked at the changed situation in the countryside afresh and discarded the somewhat narrow approach of the past 30 years. An example of such a writer is the Jiangsu author Gao Xiaosheng. Gao Xiaosheng was born and brought up in the Jiangsu countryside and did not leave it until his early twenties when he went to Shanghai and gained a reputation as an up-and-coming author. But in 1957 he became a Rightist and was sent back to his birthplace where he stayed for 21 years. This enforced homecoming was put to good account, because he did not abandon his literary ambitions while living as a peasant, and after his rehabilitation in 1978 he began publishing stories of peasant life based on a more profound knowledge of the subject than could be achieved by exiles whose original roots were not in the countryside. These stories have received considerable critical acclaim. In a *People's Daily* article about Gao Xiaosheng, Dong Jian wrote:

Gao Xiaosheng is a writer who courageously explores both life and art. The path of the explorer is never smooth. More than 20 years ago when he was a newly emerging writer, it was just because he expressed the urge to explore that he was struck down to the lowest rank in society. Yet the difficulties and hardships contributed to his search. In those days his hope was that literature would " explore life and promote socialism." It could not have occurred to him that this reasonable demand would not be fulfilled until today, 20 years later.

He continually attempts to teach a true understanding of reality and grasp the truth about things. He conscientiously and tirelessly seeks to discover the complicated underlying currents of life. Therefore his works give an impression of considerable weight.<sup>15</sup>

Among Gao Xiaosheng's stories there is one which expresses his own thoughts as he waits for the bus which will take him away from his village

15. *Renmin ribao*, 28 February 1980, p. 5.

after these 21 years of exile.<sup>16</sup> He has also written a short autobiographical piece which was translated and published in *Chinese Literature*.<sup>17</sup> Gao Xiaosheng not only has the ability to depict the everyday life of the peasants and imbue his stories with the sights and smells of the countryside, he has also been able to create characters who have the stamp of reality and are not merely reflections of attitudes to policies. Moreover he has filled a big gap in literature about the countryside by depicting the people's reactions to situations with which they had never been faced before – the twists and turns of policy from the Great Leap right through to the end of the Cultural Revolution. Throughout this period the peasants are constantly being told that the latest policy is for the good of the collective – for socialism – yet many know from their own experience that it is not doing them as individuals a great deal of good. The robust and hardworking if rather tongue-tied hero of three of his best known stories,<sup>18</sup> Chen Huansheng, finds that no matter how hard he works he cannot escape from a Chinese version of the poverty trap. The trouble is that he started off from such a low income level that he has never been able to rid himself of debt. So poor were his circumstances before that there can be no question of nostalgia for the days before collectivization, yet it is hard for him to bear the stigma attached to his annual request for an advance of grain. To add insult to injury he is given the nickname "Sieve," implying that his poverty is his own fault. His stoicism is almost boundless and he continues to do his best to keep in step with the official policy. Eventually the mistaken grain policy is changed, and with it his fortunes.

Although it could be argued that that the old policy failed partly because it did not solve the problems of people like Chen Huansheng, yet, as is so often true in the Chinese experience, changes when they occur do not seem to be connected directly in a cause and effect relationship with individuals. What is interesting in these stories, is the individual's reaction to these changes. Chen Huansheng is a well-delineated character partly because what he does and feels seems inextricably connected with his history, his experiences and his circumstances. *Chen Huansheng's Adventure in Town*, the second of these three stories (one hesitates to call them a trilogy in case more appear) shows Gao Xiaosheng attempting to improve his life after his change of fortune. His great ambition is to buy a hat, but to get the money to buy a hat requires a journey to town to sell home-made biscuits. Unfortunately he develops a high fever in town and is only rescued by a chance encounter with a cadre who knows him, who fixes him up with a bed in a local hotel. Here the author uses a gentle form of satire to describe Chen Huansheng's adventures, perhaps more in the

16. See *Xi xiedai in Gao Xiaosheng qijiu nian xiaoshuo ji*, pp. 1–11.

17. See Gao Xiaosheng "On my story The river flows east," in *Chinese Literature*, No. 3 (1980), pp. 69–73. For a brief biographical essay on Gao Xiaosheng see also Ye Zhicheng: "The string that will never break" in *Chinese Literature*, No. 12 (1980), pp. 26–31.

18. The three stories are; "Loudou hu zhu" first published in *Zhongshan* (1979), 2, "Chen Huansheng shang cheng," *Renmin wenxue* (1980), 2, and "Chen Huansheng zhuanye" in *Yuhua* (1981), 3.

nature of humour, which is reminiscent of Lu Xun's style when writing *Fengbo (Rumour)*. The third story, *Chen Huansheng Changes his Job* is much in the same vein.

Here are some extracts from *Chen Huansheng's Adventure in Town* which may serve to illustrate some of the qualities of Gao Xiaosheng's writing:

"Please may I have the bill, comrade?" he said to the girl reading a newspaper behind the counter.

"Room number?" she asked, her eyes glued to the print.

"I don't know. The last room in the east wing."

The girl tossed aside the paper and smiled sweetly at him. "So you came in Secretary Wu's jeep! Are you feeling better now?"

"I'm all right. I want to go home."

"No need to hurry. Are you an old friend of Secretary Wu? Where do you work?"

The girl was quite chatty. As she handed him the bill she smiled at him even more. Chen found her very good looking.

Chen looked down at the bill. His hand shook as if it were red hot. He couldn't believe his eyes. "How much?" he couldn't help asking, as the blood rose to his head.

"Five yuan."

"For one night?" He sweated.

"That's right."

His heart thumped vigorously. "Bloody hell," he thought. "It costs not one hat, but two!"

"You're not well!" cried the astonished girl. "You're still sweating."

"But I only came at midnight." Chen should not have protested so naively.

The girl, realising at once that he was a nobody, snapped with a poker face "I don't care when you came. You have to pay a full day's charge. . . ."

Enjoying the scenery he covered the 30 li home easily. As he was nearing the village he began to worry. How was he to explain everything to his wife? She might easily raise hell at his extravagance. Suppose he told her that he had lost his money gambling? But he never gambled. Spent it on food? He was no glutton. Had it stolen? He would get a piece of her mind for his carelessness. . . . He couldn't find a good excuse. Then he slapped his thigh in glee when it dawned on him that his adventures were worth a lot more than five yuan. Now he really had something to boast about. Who in the whole brigade, cadres and peasants alike, had ever sat in Secretary Wu's jeep? Who had ever stayed in such an expensive room? He would tell his story. Now who would sneer that he had nothing to say for himself? Who would look down at him?<sup>19</sup>

Gao Xiaosheng's similarity to Lu Xun is not merely a matter of his skill in depicting the rural scene. He also has some of Lu Xun's humanity which not only involves sympathy for the common people in their attempts to deal with the problems of life, but also hatred for those who show callousness or bigotry in their dealings with the people. Occasionally this takes the form of quite fierce satire. In the first of the Chen Huansheng stories *The Sieve*, the hero is so desperate about his plight that he decides to go and ask the schoolteacher, Chen Zhengqing,

19. See *Chinese Literature*, No. 12 (1980), pp. 9 and 11. Slight alterations have been made in the above version.

to write a letter to a newspaper, in order to draw attention to his difficulties:

Chen Zhengqing assumed a serious demeanour and shook his head. "I can't," he said.

"Why not?"

"In socialist society the facts which you told me about do not exist."

"But this is my own experience. Would I lie to you?"

"I know you wouldn't lie," Chen Zhengqing suddenly blazed. "But what you don't understand is that facts must serve needs. Facts must all go to show that socialism is paradise – therefore what you have been telling me is not facts. If I were to write such a letter for you it would certainly be called a poisonous weed. I wouldn't only lose my job, I would be smashed to the ground never to rise again."<sup>20</sup>

This kind of sharp satire doesn't play a major role in Gao Xiaosheng's stories. Usually he uses a kind of affectionate bantering humour illustrated by the extracts quoted previously. In this respect Chen Huansheng has more in common with the soldier Švejk in Hašek's famous Czech novel of the First World War, than with Lu Xun's Ah Q. There are not many real villains in Gao Xiaosheng's stories, merely narrow-minded, bigoted or short-sighted people. His heroes are the honest hard-working country people possessing the qualities praised by Su Shuyang in his radio interview. But they often bear "spiritual scars," and one of the points of similarity between Gao Xiaosheng and Lu Xun is that he is particularly skilled at depicting the mentality of his peasant characters. Their reaction to events is consistent with this mentality. In *Li Shunda Builds a House*<sup>21</sup> Li Shunda's great ambition in life is to build his own brick house. But this ambition is repeatedly thwarted. His building materials, which he has carefully amassed over the years, are first commandeered during the Great Leap and then what is left of them is destroyed in a typhoon. But Li Shunda is a *gengenpai* (a conformist) and is anxious to do what is right. One of the best episodes in the story describes the gratitude he feels when the leaders come to explain to him why it is impossible to pay him proper compensation for his loss. He may have lost his materials, but he is pathetically delighted that the leaders are actually paying him attention and talking to him about his problems. Yet although Li Shunda, like Chen Huansheng, is somewhat reminiscent of some of Lu Xun's characters, the historical and social context of their lives is quite different. In spite of their privations, their life does not compare with that of Lu Xun's characters in terms of material or spiritual hopelessness.

The two authors some of whose writings I have briefly discussed above, Gao Xiaosheng and Su Shuyang, have both contributed towards carrying forward Lu Xun's realist tradition in their different ways. They are both concerned with the common people and make them the heroes of their works. They both deal with everyday life. They have moved away from the romanticized realism of the fifties and early sixties and

20. See *Gao Xiaosheng qijiu nian xiaoshuoji*, p. 45.

21. *Ibid.* pp. 12–36.

have broken away from the stereotyped “revolutionary” works of the Cultural Revolution period. They have been concerned with “exploring” society in the way that Lui Binyan advocated: observing, analysing and reflecting what they see. Although the present is a period when some experimentation is possible, and many different styles of writing are being attempted, one must expect that the mainstream of modern Chinese literature will continue to be realism, if only because this is most likely to appeal to and be understood by the reading public. It will also accord more closely with the didactic and political aims which will continue to be an important factor. Lu Xun, Lao She and other writers of the past laid an excellent foundation for a flourishing realist literature in China. That this literature has had limited success up to now in terms of quality is because the exigencies of the revolution and mistaken policies have denied it a climate in which it could flourish. Now that at least some of the barriers have been removed, one hopes that the example of Lu Xun will be followed by more writers and that the honour accorded to him in the recent centennial celebrations will be matched by more good works of literature.