

A Mentor Once Removed

In the beginning Lu Xun read *Tianyan lun*. *The Origin of Species* was not the origin of his Darwinism. He discovered Darwin in Yan Fu's translation of T. H. Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, on a long lost Sunday afternoon sometime in 1901, when he was a twenty-year-old student in a late-in-the-Dynasty's-day "self-strengthening" School of Mining and Railways in Nanjing.¹

1901 was a good year for beginnings, new beginnings, or at least new dreams, for the year before had been as disheartening a year as China had seen in three hundred. Of course, in ordinary human terms—and what other are there?—the tragedy of the midnineteenth century Taiping Rebellion was a thousand times worse than that of the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, but any patriot who had watched China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1895, the imperialists' scramble for concessions after it, and the failure of the Reform Movement of 1898 after that, must have thought that the miserable unfitnes of the Boxers and the murderous arrogance of the avenging armies of seven Western imperialist nations, including, alas, the United States, and of one Eastern apprentice-imperialist nation, Japan (a quick learner), meant the end.²

But 1900 was not the end. The barbarian troops gave Beijing back, although they did not all leave. The "Powers" did not "carve up the Chinese melon," although they marked out spheres of influence. They let the Empress Dowager come back, with her unfortunate nephew, the Emperor, in tow, and let her put him back in his luxurious palace island house arrest. The Manchu Dynasty survived. But in 1901, when Lu Xun discovered Darwin, the Dynasty did not look fit.

And yet on that long lost Sunday, Lu Xun seems momentarily to have forgotten the Dynasty and the Empress Dowager and the Barbarians and the Boxers. In his description of that day, years later, we can still sense a transcendent excitement:

So it became popular to read new books, and I learned that China had a book called *Tianyan lun*. On Sunday I ran down to the south-

ern section of the city and bought a copy, a thick lithographed copy on white paper, for exactly five hundred wen. I opened it and took a look. It was written in excellent characters, and the first lines read: "Huxley sat alone in his house in southern England, with mountains behind him and fields before. The scenery outside his windows was as clear as if at his fingertips, and he wondered what had been there two thousand years ago, before even Rome's great general, Caesar, had arrived. And he guessed that there had been only wilderness, created by nature." —Oh, so the world has a Huxley, thinking like that in his study, and thinking so freshly. I read on without stopping, and I came upon "the struggle for existence" and "natural selection," and I came upon Socrates, and Plato, and the stoics.³

He discovered Darwin, and Spencer, and Huxley himself all at once, and he discovered much more: Homer, Hamlet, Kant, and Hume, Shakespeare, Thales, Haeckel, Job, Alexander the Great, Alexander Pope, cynics, tudors, chimpanzees, biology, logic, nebulae, nerves. He discovered whole new worlds.

As a boy Lu Xun had by nature been fascinated by nature. In his mining school he had encountered with excitement the rudiments of physics, chemistry, and geology. But it was in *Tianyan lun* that he discovered the interrelated worlds of Western science, Western literature, and Western thought. He never closed his mind to these worlds, though he may have closed his mind to some things in them. He never forgot the book. Years later he could still recite whole passages from it by heart.⁴

But what was it in *Tianyan lun* that so excited him? In *Tianyan lun* there were many voices, Darwin's and Huxley's and voices Huxley sought to refute. In Yan Fu's commentary one could hear Herbert Spencer *über alles*, but also Yan Fu himself. Whom did Lu Xun hear, and did he hear correctly? That is what we must ask of Lu Xun's first essays, written in Japan in 1903, and of his second batch of essays, written still in Japan in 1907 and 1908. But first we must say *something* of the book behind *Tianyan lun*, of *Evolution and Ethics*, which Lu Xun did not read.

Evolution and Ethics, T. H. Huxley's Romanes lecture of 1893, and its "Prolegomena" of slightly greater length, which he wrote afterward to try to say another way what he had tried to say the first time, is too good a book to be paraphrased in a paragraph, or two, or three. It should be read. It is, and will always be, worth reading. But we must say something about it before we begin, because it is a book we must bear in mind throughout this book. Its title, which Yan Fu, alas, chose not to translate, holds the hidden question behind our title, and gives us our true topic, a topic of academic interest to outsiders, of much deeper import to Chinese: Lu Xun, evolution, and ethics.⁵

Huxley wanted evolution *and* ethics. He wanted his evolution and his ethics too. He believed in evolution absolutely. He was “Darwin’s bulldog” to the end—ever, if necessary, “episcopophobic.”⁶ But when he went to Oxford in 1893, to deliver what would turn out to be virtually his last will and testament, back where he had made a monkey of Bishop Wilberforce thirty-three years before, he went not to attack any more benighted bishops (a subspecies, c.f. Gongsun Long: “A white horse is not a horse.”⁷) opposed to evolution, but benighted evolutionists opposed to (Judeo-Christian) ethics, simpleminded might-is-rightists ready and all too willing to do their worst, and ours, in Darwin’s name.

Huxley was disgusted by Social Darwinists who preached “fanatical individualism,” practiced “reasoned savagery,” given the chance, and glorified, as long as they were winning, “the gladiatorial theory of existence.”⁸

He was disgusted by Social Darwinian “pigeon fanciers” who spoke of bettering our breed by weeding out the unfit—or at least by letting them die (“If they are sufficiently complete to live, they do live, and it is well they should live. If they are not sufficiently complete to live, they die, and it is best they should die,”—for “under the natural order of things society is constantly excreting its unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless members”⁹).

And he was especially disgusted by Social Darwinists who hid such ruthless indifference behind paeans of praise for evolution inexorably working its way, in Darwin’s own phrase, alas, “towards perfection.”¹⁰ Huxley believed in no such perfection, certainly none won over the dead bodies of the unfit (though who could deny that that is how our species won its existence?). “The theory of evolution encourages no millennial anticipations,” he said:¹¹ “The prospect of attaining untroubled happiness, or of a state which can, even remotely, deserve the title of perfection, appears to me to be as misleading an illusion as ever was dangled before the eyes of poor humanity. And there have been many of them.”¹² Huxley was disgusted by those whose sugar-plum visions of perfection blinded them to the price of evolution, to its pain.¹³ He was disgusted by those who blithely said that “all is well since all grows better.”¹⁴ He did not believe that all grows better, and he was sure that all was not well:

I know no study which is so unutterably saddening as that of the evolution of humanity, as it is set forth in the annals of history. Out of the darkness of prehistoric ages man emerges with the marks of his lowly origin strong upon him. He is a brute, only more intelligent than the other brutes, a blind prey to impulses, which as often as not lead him to destruction; a victim to endless illusions, which

make his mental existence a terror and a burden, and fill his physical life with barren toil and battle.¹⁵

"If anything is real," said Huxley, "pain, and sorrow, and wrong are realities." Evil is real. And "evil stares us in the face on all sides." It does, it always has, and it ever shall.¹⁶

But what then should we do? Leap into "the great work of helping one another":

I think I do not err in assuming that however diverse their view on philosophical and religious matters, most men are agreed that the proportion of good and evil in life may be very sensibly affected by human action. I never heard anybody doubt that the evil may be thus increased, or diminished; and it would seem to follow that good must be similarly susceptible of addition or subtraction. Finally, to my knowledge, nobody professes to doubt that so far forth as we possess a power of bettering things, it is our paramount duty to use it and to train all our intellect and energy to this supreme service of our kind.¹⁷

Huxley was for human action. That is why the Chinese liked him. He was disgusted by those who said evolution tells us we can do nothing ("You and I can do nothing at all. It's all a matter of evolution. We can only wait for evolution. Perhaps in four or five thousand years evolution may have carried men beyond this state of things").¹⁸ But he was equally disgusted by those who said it tells us we can do anything ("All's fair in love and war" and in "the interneccine struggle for existence").¹⁹ That was, he admitted, what evolution tells us. It tells us we can do anything at all that will fit us to survive, and to be fruitful and multiply. But we should not listen to it. Its message is not for us. At least it is no longer for us. It is a great mistake "to apply the analogy of cosmic nature to society." Rabid social Darwinian lawyers from the Law School of the Jungle are guilty of yet another "misapplication of the stoical injunction to follow nature."²⁰ They fail to see "that cosmic nature is no school of virtue, but the headquarters of the enemy of ethical nature."²¹ They fail to see that "social progress means a checking of the cosmic process at every step and the substitution for it of another, which may be called the ethical process."²² Granted, "for his successful progress, throughout the savage state, man has been largely indebted to those qualities which he shares with the ape and tiger," but now, "after the manner of successful persons, civilized man would gladly kick down the ladder by which he has climbed. He would be only too pleased to see 'the ape and tiger die,'" for "there is a general con-

sensus that the ape and tiger methods of the struggle for existence are not reconcilable with sound ethical principles."²³

Man's way was the ethical way. Huxley was a good Confucian. But there was something wrong, if not with his rhyme, with his reason. At least there was something very strange.

There was something stranger than ever about "man's place in nature." We had been in an odd enough position at the end of Huxley's first book, *Man's Place in Nature*, which he had written in 1860 to defend Darwin and to fulfill the promise of the one sentence Darwin had written in *The Origin* about our origin. "Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history."²⁴ Huxley *did* throw light on what he called "the question of questions for mankind—the ascertainment of the place which Man occupies in nature and of his relations to the universe of things. Whence our race has come; what are the limits of our power over nature, and of nature's power over us; to what goal are we tending. . . ."²⁵ At least he threw light on the question of whence our race has come. He produced respectable scientific evidence to support the thesis that everyone knew Darwin had implied: that we are flesh and blood relatives of "the brutes."

But even as Huxley the scientist argued that point, he argued in a most unscientific manner about "the grandeur of the place Man occupies" in nature.²⁶ "No one," he said, "is more strongly convinced than I am of the vastness of the gulf between civilized man and the brutes; or is more certain that whether *from* them or not, he is assuredly not *of* them."²⁷ Thanks to man's "marvelous endowment of intelligible and rational speech," which has allowed him alone to accumulate and organize his experience, man now stands "as on a mountain top, far above the level of his humble fellows, and transfigured from his grosser nature by reflecting, here and there, a ray from the infinite source of truth."²⁸ With our feet in the clay and our heads in the clouds, what *was* our place in nature? Huxley, in a clairvoyant, or lax, moment had waxed as mystic as Darwin had in his famous lax or clairvoyant moment in the primeval forests of Brazil. But in his autobiography, Darwin, declaring himself an agnostic, recanted his Brazilian faith that "no one can stand in these solitudes unmoved, and not feel that there is more in man than the mere breath of his body."²⁹ What is odd is that Huxley, the father of agnosticism, never saw any need to recant his metaphysical pronouncements about rays reflected "from the infinite source of truth."

Instead, in *Evolution and Ethics*, he pushed us up to an even higher peak. He had us not only "from but not of" the brutes but "from but not of" evolution. He raised us high enough above evolution to condemn it. "Brought before the tribunal of ethics," he said, "the cosmos might well seem to stand condemned. The conscience of man revolted

against the moral indifference of nature, and the microcosmic atom should have found the illimitable macrocosm guilty.³⁰ Huxley was revolted by the "moral indifference of nature," and he called on us to revolt against it, to combat it "at every step." But how could we? Who were we to judge the universe? What were we that we could rebel against Mother Nature that begat us? This was filial impiety of truly cosmic proportions. It also seemed logically impossible. For Huxley himself had done his best to prove us perfectly natural. He had argued that "man, physical, intellectual, and moral, is as much a part of nature as purely a product of the cosmic process as the humblest weed."³¹ He had said that those who argued "in favor of the origin of moral sentiments in the same way as other natural phenomena, by a process of evolution" were "on the right track."³² He seemed to believe in that view that so pained Darwin's wife, Darwin's own opinion "that *all* morality has grown up by evolution [*italics Mrs. Darwin's*]."³³ But still he pitted the ethical process *against* the cosmic process, protesting "that if the conclusion that the two are antagonistic is logically absurd, I am sorry for logic, because, as we have seen, the fact is so."³⁴ But how could it be so? In sicking us on evolution was he not setting evolution at its own throat?

Of all the creatures of evolution, man was odd man out. And Huxley said he should be. He said we should refuse to go along. That in itself meant that our place in nature was a lonely one, exalted or no. But it was even lonelier if one accepted Huxley's protestation that our cosmic resistance was doomed to defeat. Remember, Huxley had no "millennial anticipations."³⁵ He had no faith that man would live happily or at all ever after, in this world or any other. At best all we could do was cultivate our garden until in "the procession of the great year," "the evolution of our globe shall have entered so far upon its downward course that the cosmic process resumes its sway; and, once more, the State of Nature prevails over the surface of our planet."³⁶

Now granted, Pogonian fears about the sun expanding in ten million years killing all life ("and me so young")³⁷ may seem silly. Less silly is the certainty Huxley was blessed not to know, that we could blow ourselves off our planet in the twentieth century. But philosophically the fact remains: Huxley granted man no immortality even as a race. He placed man, all mankind, as a *species*, in a natural existential predicament. "Out of the darkness," he said, we come.³⁸ And unto it we shall return, unto the darkness of biological extinction.

Staring evolution in the face, Huxley came to the existential question: "What do we do in the meantime?" And the answer for Huxley was perfectly simple: "Choose to act ethically." Why? Because (*pace, feminae*):

We are grown men, and must play the man

strong in will
to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield,

cherishing the good that falls in our way, and bearing the evil in and around us, with stout hearts set on diminishing it. So far, we all may strive in one faith towards one hope:

It may be that the gulfs will wash us down,
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
. . . but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note may yet be done.³⁹

Again, noble rhyme, half of it Tennyson's, but odd reason—for an agnostic, proto-existentialist. "*Naturam expellas furca tamen usque recurret.*"⁴⁰ Nature would win, but we must strive against it, and against evil. And somehow, as Camus would later say, "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."⁴¹ That true existentialist "creed" was strange enough, but Huxley's was stranger: "The practice of self-restraint and renunciation," necessary for our struggle, "is not happiness," he said, "though it may be something much better."⁴² But what in Heaven's name was that? Why, even if we did possess "a power of bettering things," was it "our paramount duty to use it?"⁴³ Whence came that duty? Why should we do "work of noble note," and how were we to know what it was? How did Huxley know? That was the strangest thing of all. The agnostic knew. "That one should rejoice in the good man, forgive the bad man, and pity and help all men to the best of one's ability is surely," he said, "indisputable. It is the glory of Judaism and of Christianity to have proclaimed this truth, through all their aberrations."⁴⁴ How did he know? Who knows? Not knowing how he knew, he said through "intuition."⁴⁵ But intuition was a strange power for "a product of the cosmic process" as natural "as the humblest weed," and it was illusion if there was nothing to intuit.

What does this all prove? It is not clear. But clearly Huxley, *episcopophagous*, who had no use for any god, who would not believe in one without "good grounds for belief" and who saw none, believed in good, a good above and beyond the good-for-me-and-my-genes good of evolution.⁴⁶ What his belief proves is indeed unclear, but we must bear it in mind. When we begin to hear modern scholars praise *Tianyan lun* for starting Lu Xun on his inexorable march toward materialism, we must remember how much Huxley, his mentor once removed, despite his own best efforts, was an idealist.

The Pen, Not the Scalpel or the Sword

When he was twenty, Lu Xun went to Japan. Landing in Yokohama on April 4, 1902, with a small band of fellow graduates of the Nanjing School of Mining and Railways, chosen, sent, and supported by the Manchu government, he was expected to learn Japanese, study more about mining, and then return to serve his country—and his dynasty. For two years he did what he was supposed to, more or less. At least he diligently studied Japanese, and German, and a little science, in a special Tokyo preparatory school for Chinese. But then, instead of trying to fight his way into Tokyo Imperial University to study mining in earnest, he took the advice of one of his Japanese teachers and went off alone to Sendai to study medicine.¹

In those first two years, however, he set out, without realizing it, on his true career. He started to write. He wrote and published his first four bonafide articles. He published his first two translations. And he flirted with revolution. But he did not distinguish himself as a great writer, a great thinker, or a great revolutionary.² Indeed it is hard to find even hints of greatness in either his thought or action during those first two years, although some scholars have managed to do so more easily than others.³ His writing was unrepentantly old fashioned, his thinking was unremarkably typical of that of other patriotic students in Japan, and his “revolutionary acts,” though not without some risk to his government stipend, were tame.

And yet we can glimpse concerns in Lu Xun’s early thought and action that would stay with him, and prove important, however unremarkable in their beginnings. Our first record of “the thought of Lu Xun,” for example, happily for us Darwinian, is important precisely because it was so common: Lu Xun’s first intellectual concern when he went to Japan was China’s fitness—or rather unfitness. That is what he and his best friend Xu Shoushang talked about almost from the first day they met in September 1902. As Xu Shoushang would later recall in at least two different reminiscences:

One day we were talking about how terribly cheap Chinese lives were in history, especially when Chinese were enslaved by foreign races, and we could only face each other in sad silence. Thereafter we became even closer friends, and whenever we met, we talked about the failings of the Chinese national character. Because we were in a foreign country there were many things to upset us. . . . We also often talked about three related questions: 1) What was mankind's ideal nature? 2) What did the Chinese race lack most? 3) Where lay the source of its sickness?⁴

That was the pressing question. What was the source of China's sickness, China's weakness, China's unfitness? Every patriotic student knew of the insulting Englishman who had branded China "the invalid of the Orient," and every patriotic student knew by now the frightening Darwinian context into which the would-be reformers Yan Fu and Liang Qichao had put that insult: In the jungle world of warring states, sick nations, weak nations, unfit nations perished in the natural international struggle for existence.⁵ Whole peoples perished—where there was no vision. But vision could make a people fit. That was the Lamarckian promise—although called Darwinian—with which Liang Qichao had countered his own vision of Darwinian doom. Armed with a fortuitous mistranslation and a misunderstanding clearly based on wishful thinking, Liang Qichao had proclaimed that "Mr. Darwin has said every living thing, no matter of what kind, must frequently change its form and make it beneficial to itself, for only thus may it survive."⁶ The Lamarckian promise was that one could change one's form. One could make oneself fit.

But what Darwin had actually said was that "any being, if it vary however slightly in any manner profitable to itself, under the complex and sometimes varying conditions of life, will have a better chance of surviving, and thus be *naturally selected*."⁷ There was a world of difference between a being or species that could "change its form and make it beneficial to itself" and one that might "vary" in a "manner profitable to itself—and thus be *naturally selected*," but Liang Qichao, overlooking the world of difference between transitive and intransitive verbs, leapt to the conclusion that the Darwinian secret of survival for human beings was not natural selection but selection by man. "Selection by man," he said, "means carefully to seek out the unfit in oneself and change it, to make oneself fit to survive."⁸ And "selection," wrote the great would-be reformer, "is revolution."⁹

Liang Qichao leapt to Lamarckian conclusions. So did most of his readers. So did Lu Xun. And they all leapt to potentially revolutionary conclusions. There was revolutionary potential in Lu Xun's search for the

source of China's illness. But there was nothing remarkable about his search. Every patriot with any vision at all was searching for the source of China's seeming unfitness. Liang Qichao's "Darwinian" faith—which Lu Xun shared—that the source of that unfitness could be recognized and rooted out, did not make evolutionary sense. No biological "creature" had ever fit itself to survive. True, eugenic fiddling may now be possible, but eugenic fiddling had nothing at all to do with the evolution that has made eugenic fiddling possible. Evolution had not "progressed" through the efforts of organisms to change themselves.

And yet if Liang Qichao's novel Lamarckian metaphor did not make scientific sense, Lu Xun's common medical metaphor did make common sense. Who could doubt it? What could be more "natural" than to diagnose one's illness, cure it, and so strengthen oneself, the better to fight the good fight? That is what Chinese had been trying to do ever since 1860. What was new was that now even the reformer Liang Qichao recommended a "revolutionary" cure, although, eschewing violence, the "revolution" he had in mind was still reformist.¹⁰ At any rate, small wonder that Xu Shoushang would later claim that he and Lu Xun concluded at the time that "the only cure [for China's ills] was revolution."¹¹

And yet Lu Xun's first essays were not revolutionary. His first effort might have been. "Sibada zhi hun" (the soul of Sparta) was a weapon-waving piece that extolled in stilted, melodramatic classical Chinese the Greek version of that later classic Roman refrain, "*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.*" Lu Xun retold the tale of the Battle of Thermopylae, building in extravagantly archaic prose a monument to the wife of the lone survivor, the unfortunate chap with eye trouble, who slipped away to fight again another day, rather than blindly die without striking a single well-aimed blow for his fatherland. He went home to profess once more his love for his wife, while he waited for a better time to give his life. But she, ashamed, cursed him for his "cowardice" and killed herself to spur him back to a death now doubly owed his state. He paid that debt at the Battle of Plataea, and his general granted that at the end he showed a Spartan soul. But because he had survived a defeat, and so had broken Spartan law, he was granted no burial. Instead Sparta raised a monument to his wife.¹² And Lu Xun did likewise.

But Lu Xun, faithful indeed to the soul of Sparta, praised militant self-sacrifice in the name of national defense not revolution. His cry was for Chinese to fight with Spartan spirit not against their monarch or the Manchus, but against the *Russians*. For like all Chinese students in Japan in 1903, Lu Xun was up in arms—figuratively—because the Russians were threatening to seize Manchuria. He was only one of a host of patriotic polemicists, seasoned and unseasoned, who turned to Sparta for inspiration.

Who first discovered Sparta it is hard to say—probably some Japanese. But it was not Lu Xun. Liang Qichao urged Chinese to be Spartan, militantly Spartan, half a year before Lu Xun did.¹³ And a month before Lu Xun told or translated his tale of Thermopylae, a band of Chinese students in Japan used the example of that battle in their open letter to the Qing Court, demanding that they be organized into a “volunteer army to resist the Russians.” (They were not.) “Unto this very day,” they wrote, “the glorious fame of the Battle of Thermopylae shakes the nations of the world. In the West every three foot child [*sic*] knows the story. Just think. If even in that little Greek peninsula there were righteous warriors who would not disgrace their nation, in the millions of square miles of our empire can there be none?”¹⁴ That was the question Lu Xun echoed, though his echo was a bit odd in a story whose hero was its heroine: “Alas are there no men today unwilling to be worse than women? There must be some who will throw down their pens and stand up?”¹⁵

Perhaps there were, but Lu Xun was not one of them. Nor would he ever be. He would never “*tou bi cong rong*” (throw away his pen and join the army). For all his brave talk (and some of it was brave) his pen would be his only sword—or spear, or dagger.

But if he would not hearken to his own Spartan call to arms, of what import was it? Not much, except that it revealed a hard, callous, unfeeling, nationalistic streak in him that we must keep in mind. The future crusader against customs, laws, and morals, in his own country, that “ate people,” extolled in “the Soul of Sparta” as cannibalistic a national ethos as the world has ever known. The Spartan People devoured Spartan people. Spartan eugenics, Spartan martial law, Spartan “honor,” all ate people. Lu Xun extolled a Spartan law that demanded senseless self-sacrifice. He extolled a Spartan sense of shame that led to senseless suicide. In 1919, his “madman” would see in the words “righteousness and morality,” scrawled over every page of Chinese history, the words “eat people.”¹⁶ Why in 1903 could he not see the same words in the pages of Spartan history?

There is another thing we should keep in mind. In “The Soul of Sparta” Lu Xun applauded the total subjugation of romantic love to love of country. Applauding the notion that “a Spartan warrior speaks of no love above his country,” Lu Xun showed no more sympathy for the warrior who returned to see his wife once more before he gave his life, because he loved her, than the warrior’s Spartan wife did.¹⁷ *Ai guo* (love of country) *über alles*. Was it complete coincidence that three years later Lu Xun should briefly return to China and seemingly sacrifice all hope of romantic love himself by accepting a loveless marriage arranged for him by his mother? Was it complete coincidence that a few days after his wedding

he should return alone to his duty in Japan, sacrificing on the twin altars of *zhung* and *xiao* (loyalty and filial piety) a bride doomed to a life of cool support and cold neglect, a bride he would feed but also starve? Lu Xun's wedding feast was a perfect example of the "cannibalism" he would later decry.¹⁸ When he finally did decry it, he would know of what he spoke.

At that time filial piety was the more conspicuous of the altars on which he sacrificed his bride's happiness—and his own.¹⁹ But one senses something of "The Soul of Sparta" in his *mamu buren* (unfeeling and inhumane) behavior. Thirty-one years later he would write that on rereading that essay he could not prevent his ears from burning—with shame. But he seems to have been more embarrassed by his essay's style than by its content. "Although I am ashamed of the works of my youth," he wrote, "I do not regret them. Indeed I am still quite fond of them."²⁰—And so two years before he died he reprinted them. We must remember that, at the end, when we ask whether his ears burned with reason.

At any rate, there was precious little that was revolutionary in "The Soul of Sparta." Nor was there much that was revolutionary in his next works, in his first translations and in his essays on radium and on China's mineral resources.

Lu Xun's first translation, of an odd little reminiscence about Victor Hugo, written by Victor Hugo's wife (although falsely attributed by most Chinese scholars—and by Lu Xun—to Victor Hugo himself) was a restrained protest against official injustice (being a true account of Victor Hugo rescuing a poor young woman from a six-year jail sentence summarily given her for pummeling a young dandy who put a snowball down her back), but there was no indication that Lu Xun looked to revolution rather than to reform to correct such injustice.²¹

The rest of his translations of 1903 were even less revolutionary, for they were translations, or a translation and a half, of two "science fiction" novels of Jules Verne, which Lu Xun translated to excite interest in real science, and in the study of it.²² Real works of science, said Lu Xun, too easily put readers to sleep. But Jules Verne's *De La Terre à la Lune* would awaken Chinese to an all important fact of life: "Man is an animal with hope of progress"—the alleged promise of evolution.²³ And science fiction would awaken Chinese to the fact that science could save the nation. But that was the once and future cry of the gradualist reformers Yan Fu and Liang Qichao, and in time Hu Shi and even Deng Xiaoping. It was not a cry for revolution—however revolutionary its consequences.

Lu Xun's report, "Shuo ri" (on radium), was a perfect example of a story of scientific fact that could put people to sleep, even as it conveyed something of the excitement of step-by-step scientific progress. With archaic grammar and a bewildering host of neologisms, Lu Xun told the

story of Mme. Curie's recent discovery of radium. From somewhere he managed to marshal an impressive array of facts about the mysteries of radioactivity, although he did not display any deep understanding of those facts. Years later he would confess that his scientific level had at the time been low, and that he had "stolen" his information, but at least he had honestly expressed wonder at the wondrous ways scientists unwittingly worked together to make progress. "From the study of X rays," he wrote, "came the discovery of radium emanations; from the study of radium emanations came the theory of electrons and from that, in a flash, came a great change in our concept of matter." And so, he said, "although we recognize Mme. Curie's great contribution, we should really take our hats off to Mr. Röntgen, the late nineteenth century discoverer of X rays."²⁴ In the world of science, revolutionary discoveries were evolutionary.

What was the point? It is hard to say. Wang Shiqing in a recent commentary has said that even today "this paper, in dispelling superstition, liberating thought, propagating materialism, and opposing metaphysics, offers us great inspiration."²⁵ But inspiration lies in the eye of the beholder. It is not easy to find inspirational preaching in the original. One can see a Westernized, pragmatic, down-to-earth dedication to the good old neo-Confucian investigation of things and the extension of knowledge, but if that was made novel with its neologies, it was still not inspirationally revolutionary—because Lu Xun came to no revolutionary conclusions.

Only in his essay "Zhongguo dizhi luelun" (a brief discussion of the geology of China) were there hints of revolutionary ire, hints that would somewhat compromise his one and only effort to repay his government's six-year investment in his study of mining—before he gave that up to study medicine. Three years later he would publish, with a classmate, one echo of his essay—but thereafter he would never mention mining again.²⁶

With or without hints of revolutionary ire, however, his all too brief discussion of Chinese geology could hardly have seemed sufficient repayment for six year's support, even though his basic thesis was one the Qing government applauded. For, after all, all he argued was that China should seize control of its resources before foreigners did.

But, alas, to prove his point he had to rely, rather ominously, on those very foreigners' own reports on the extent of China's resources—most especially on the extent of China's coal reserves. He tried to cheer his readers up by citing the contention of a German geologist, F. von Richthofen, that China was "the number one coal country in the world," but he also purposely frightened his readers by citing the worries of many that coal would do China in, by inviting imperialist aggression.²⁷ One way or another he said, "Coal is intimately related to a nation's economic

growth or decline. Indeed it is enough to determine the great question of a nation's rise or fall, its life or death."²⁸ China must control its coal or perish.

Now this was hardly a novel argument. The Nanjing School of Mining and Railways had been founded with that very thought in mind—and Liang Qichao had been making similar Darwinesque arguments about the vital importance of this, that, and the other to China's survival in the international struggle for existence for seven years. Nonetheless Lu Xun's Darwinian insistence on the Darwinian importance of coal is interesting and important because it was his first explicit Darwinian argument and because it was a Darwinian argument in two ways at once.

Part of his argument was honestly scientific. Perhaps more clearly than any Chinese before him, he described with Western terminology the succession of geological epochs that had led to the formation of coal, and somewhat gratuitously he described the biological evolution of flora and fauna that accompanied those epochs, summing up his survey with the rather droll comment that nature was an open book, "*Evolution*, written by the creator himself, which Darwin plagiarized in order to become a great nineteenth century author."²⁹

But having established that coal and the Chinese race were both products of evolution, he argued that the one would be the *sine qua non* of survival for the other, in its unending evolutionary struggle for existence. Coal was the evolutionary weapon (an odd concept) with which the Chinese could beat back—and this was Lu Xun's term—the "White Peril" (*bai sheng*).³⁰ Coal was "the hope at the bottom of Pandora's box." For "if we grasp it," wrote Lu Xun, "each day shall see us nearer to a bright and glorious future. If we lose it, all we will be able to do is bewail our inevitable death. Countrymen, we must make the right choice."³¹ For any people who lost control of their geological resources would become "fossils, to be picked up and sighed over as relics of an extinct species."³² The Chinese race would be one with poor Yorick.

This was evolutionary overkill. The Chinese race was in no danger of extinction. The Chinese reproductive system was not going to run out of steam because China ran out of coal. The Chinese had lost political control of coal and country three hundred years before—to the Manchus. But the Chinese were more fruitful than ever. If some "blue-eyed white-faced alien race"³³ were now to seize China from the Manchus, why should the Chinese be in greater danger of extinction than were the Indians, who by all reports continued to multiply like mad, slaves though they were in someone else's sunlit empire.

True enough the White Peril sometimes played for keeps. For some races the threat of biological extinction was no joke. American Indians

had cause for alarm. The last of the Mohicans could have echoed Lu Xun's rhetoric without exaggeration. But the Chinese were not in danger of extinction. Any imperialists who tried to drain the Chinese gene pool—through acts of either love or war—would die of exhaustion. Lu Xun's rhetoric made no sense.

Why then did this young lover of science say such things? How could he say such things? How could he say of his people, surrounded by imperialists and yet fighting among themselves, that they would be "eliminated by the cosmic process; they will degenerate day by day becoming apes, then birds, then clams, then algae, and finally inorganic things?"³⁴ That was not evolutionary argument, it was patriotic bombast.

Small wonder. Lu Xun was an angry and exasperated patriot. But patriots who admire his anti-imperialistic patriotism today must do so with clear heads. For although his anti-imperialistic patriotism is admirable, his evolutionary argument is not. He should have known better. If he did not, we must admit that a budding scientist did not yet understand evolution. If he did, we must admit that in the midst of moral indignation he did not give a fig for true science. In either case we must admit that in such moments Lu Xun did *not* speak with scientific authority. We must be prepared to admit the mystery that his rhyme rang truer than his reason.

At any rate, it is in these ringing if unreasonable rhymes that those who have ears to hear hear revolutionary overtones and those who had ears to hear probably heard revolutionary overtones—in 1903. But then as now, to hear one had to want to hear, because Lu Xun's revolutionary overtones were not very loud.

Lu Xun did at one point verbally pound the table and exclaim, "China belongs to the Chinese!"³⁵—And those could be fighting words, when voiced by Sun Yatsen and Co. For then they meant, "We Chinese must seize our country from the Manchus!" But Lu Xun never said that. He spoke only vaguely of Chinese protecting China from the pale faces. He never mentioned the Manchus.

Only in one line did he openly raise the specter of revolution. In a strangely inverted argument, if revolution was his aim, he argued that geological strata could be skipped just as stages of social evolution could be. "Those who talk of the history of the human race," he said, "declare that it is a natural law of political evolution to go from a monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, to a republic. But surely one can find in history instances of sudden switches from a stern monarchy to a republic at one stroke of a bloody sword. Changes in geological strata are also like this."³⁶

How in Heaven's name, or evolution's, could "revolutions" in the earth imitate the revolutions of mankind? Was the earth to take lessons from earthlings? Changes in geological strata were not at all like bloody

coups, nor were bloody coups in any way like changes in geological strata. The most ardent admirers of Lu Xun should admit that as science this simile was ridiculous.

And yet it echoes Sun Yatsen's equally ridiculous rationale for revolution. For Sun Yatsen did believe that just as there were strata in the earth so there were strata in human history, fixed strata and yet strata that could be skipped, by men who had foresight, will power, and bloody swords. Revolution was the way to *lie deng*, to overleap an evolutionary stratum. Revolution was the way to leap into a republic from a monarchy—without having to slog through the stratum of constitutional monarchy.³⁷

Of course, Lu Xun was right when he said that history held examples of bloody swords changing monarchies into republics. What was ridiculous was his insistence, and Sun Yatsen's, that geology be dragged into the argument. For fixed or jumpable strata theories of human evolution were not down to earth theories at all. They came from the stratosphere, off the top of Sun Yatsen's head—and Lu Xun's, and Liang Qichao's and Yan Fu's. All of those gentlemen believed in naturally fixed stages of human evolution. The revolutionaries believed they could leap them. The reformers believed they could not. Lu Xun supported Sun Yatsen's great leap theory, although he stated it backwards, and so he supported revolution—at least in one sentence.

Much has been made of that sentence, that "one can find in history instances of sudden switches from a stern monarchy to a republic at one stroke of a bloody sword." Too much has been made of it. Historians in the People's Republic have quoted it over and over again to prove that Lu Xun, "Great Revolutionary" in the making, knew intuitively, *ab origine*, that "*zao fan you li*," that "It is right to rebel."³⁸ That was the cosmic truth to which all Marxism-Leninism, the Chairman would say, could be reduced. And so that has been the cosmic truth that historians in the People's Republic have sought to establish above all others. But Lu Xun did not establish it, at least not in 1903. His support of it was backhanded at best. At best he *implied* that it was right to rebel. He never said so outright.

The great opponent of revolution, the great Darwinian, gradualist opponent of Sun Yatsen's great leap theory, Liang Qichao, was a hundred times more revolutionary in his rhetoric than Lu Xun was. Liang Qichao said, "Revolution is an inescapable law in the world of evolution." He said, "The work of revolution (what the Japanese call *geming* and what I call *bian-ge*) is today our only way of saving China." He said, "If our people want to survive, they must begin by forcefully advocating a great revolution, and by carrying out a great revolution." He said, "I have held from the beginning in my essays that political revolution is the only way to save the nation."³⁹

True, Liang Qichao always managed by the end of each essay to re-translate revolution into reform. Nevertheless his language was inflammatory. Lu Xun's was not. Lu Xun was cautious, in word and, indeed, in deed. Except on the day he cut off his queue.

That was a revolutionary act. And yet he was slow to act even then. He took his cue to cut his queue from his friend Xu Shouchang. But Xu Shouchang cut his queue as soon as he got to Japan—half a year before Lu Xun cut his, and Lu Xun reached Japan half a year before Xu Shouchang. Why did he wait so long?—Perhaps because he faced a greater risk. The watchdog of his class was the notoriously reactionary—or loyal—Qing official, Yao Wenfu, who did not take barbershop rebellions lightly. He could not, it is true, have cut off Lu Xun's close cropped head, but he could have cut off his stipend, and Lu Xun wanted to study. So slow to act though he was, as the first in his class to cut off his queue, Lu Xun showed courage.⁴⁰

As things turned out he was lucky. The day was saved by the antics of a student four years younger than Lu Xun, but hotter of head, Zou Rong, so soon to publish his pamphlet, *The Revolutionary Army*, so soon to be arrested, and so soon to die in prison. Zou Rong and several friends, in the Spring of 1903, learning that Yao Wenfu was overseeing one of his female charges a bit closely, surprised him in a position so compromising that they were able to cut off *his* queue and send him scurrying, without his tail between his legs, back to China, shorn of his dignity and thus unable to exact revenge.⁴¹

So was Lu Xun rescued. He had defied the authorities, but he had not had to live up to the brave talk he had inscribed on the back of a photograph taken to immortalize his revolutionary hairdo in living black and white:

My heart cannot flee the arrows of desire
As wind and rain darken our ancient land.
Why look to the Cold Star? He does not understand.
I shall dedicate my blood to China.⁴²

The first and third lines of this famous poem remain so cryptic—no one is sure to what Lu Xun's allusions allude—that they are barely worth translating.⁴³ But the second and fourth lines are clear enough, especially to those who protest too much “that it is right to rebel.” They see in them crystal-clear proof of revolutionary resolve. But it was youthful resolve, brave talk but only talk, clear language, but language we cannot take literally, because Lu Xun did not take it literally. In 1903 he joined in Japan a Zhejiang forerunner of Sun Yatsen's revolutionary party, but he never fol-

lowed any real revolutionaries into battle.⁴⁴ In 1903 he cut off his queue, offered his blood to his country, called on men of Spartan spirit to “throw down their pens and arise,” and then put up his pen and went to medical school.

True, years later he would write that part of the “beautiful dream” that led him to medical school was “to be a military doctor in time of war,” but he did not describe that war as a revolutionary war, and he never went to war anyway.⁴⁵ For after two years of study he quit medical school and went back to writing, giving up on his countrymen’s bodies to make war on his countrymen’s minds. Lu Xun’s wars were all pen wars. He never grasped a real sword. His “daggers and spears” were essays. His bravest act would be to walk unarmed to the funeral of an assassinated fellow pensman.⁴⁶ By that time, having waged pen wars against the running dogs of warlords and the murderous Guomindang (*not* exaggerated language), he had indeed risked his blood for his country. Still we must distinguish between militant language and militant action, between pen wars and real wars, between struggles to change men’s minds and struggles to cut off men’s heads. If Lu Xun thought it right to rebel, we must know what he meant by rebellion.